Book Reviews
Issue 6.1 (Spring 2017)

Review of *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* by André M. Carrington (University of Minnesota Press)

Daniella Mascarenhas

ABSTRACT   André Carrington's 'Speculative Blackness' is a novel approach to the consumption of race representation in media. Carrington explores how Blackness is manufactured, consumed, and transformed through the speculative fiction genre across multiple 20th and 21st century mediums. Traditional media of comic books and television shows reveal the marginalized status of Black figures however, these media do not exist in a vacuum. The consumption of speculative fiction is a transformative process for the original content, which consequentially produces amateur media due to a long-established history of fan interaction. Black representation is characterized as the exception, not the rule, in traditional production, but fan consumption reconfigures these notions. Ultimately, Carrington's work is an innovative dialogue regarding a genre that creates worlds speculating on what could be. Speculative fiction breaks down preexisting notions of our reality and creates worlds with entirely new expectations and interactions. With the creative liberty of the genre, Carrington casts Black representation as a consumed media but also an imaginative effort.

Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction. By André M. Carrington. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 282 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978 0 8166 7896 9. US List: $25.00.

André Carrington's *Speculative Blackness* is a novel approach to the consumption of race representation in media. He demonstrates how fan interaction is equally as important as media production. Carrington explores how Blackness is manufactured, consumed, and transformed through the speculative fiction genre across multiple 20th and 21st century mediums. Traditional media of comic books and television shows reveal the marginalized status of Black figures however, these media do not exist in a vacuum. The consumption of speculative fiction is a transformative process for the original content, which consequentially produces amateur media due to a long-established history of fan interaction. Black representation is characterized as the exception, not the rule, in traditional production, but fan consumption reconfigures these notions.

Carrington is encumbered with the task of situating fan fiction as a legitimate endeavor. Fan-produced works document how audiences consume and translate media into influential societal markers. Carrington uses an example that demonstrates the subtle interaction of race, privilege, power, and representation in the context of media production by examining self-publishing American science fiction clubs originating in the 1930s. Carl Brandon, the Black persona of a White author, published multiple fan fictions that were greeted positively and indicated a shift toward Black inclusion until it was revealed he was merely a White invention. However, this hoax was not without merit. Carrington shows (by historically tracing publications, correspondence, and events) that constant audience interaction shaped how fans and publishers alike represented Blackness and legitimized Black contributions to speculative fiction. Audience interaction represents the persistent and strategic application of counter power against the White

cooptation of a Black fan base by opening the textual field produced, in part, through Brandon's work, to audience commentary and contest, and through the continued production of science fiction by black authors (despite the narrow room available to challenge White establishment authors).

Carrington's last chapter again touches on the transformative importance of consumption through online fan fiction featured on *Remember Us*, an archive featuring characters of color. Clearly, Carrington's project is bolstered by a large and prolific body of work. The author, however, only recognizes the existence of Black fan fiction and not the measure of its influence. Through no fault of his own, Carrington is limited by research into a new field that lacks metrics and methods to measure the reach and influence of fan-generated media. Traditional media has trackable societal influence (fan fiction, sales, progressive publishing), but how influential are self-published fan creations? With no method of tracking their dissemination, their influence is questionable. This critique is not levied to undermine Carrington's efforts, but to prompt future research into methods that can be refined and measured (i.e. tracking downloads, counting page hits, sales of self-published e-books, etc.). The existence of Black-centric fan bases is telling of a racially shifting audience, but how this audience redefines itself, within itself, is undiagnosed.

Carrington also looks at the process of media consumption in various versions of *Star Trek* and comic book universes. Critically, Carrington admits this project "emerges out of a distinctly African American and feminist practice of scholarship as well as my experience as a fan" (17). The research into Blackness and speculative fiction makes thorough use of several examples that are markedly female. For instance, Carrington looks at characters in the Marvel Comics universe, focusing heavily on the character Storm. He explicates her uniquely African origin story, Storm's interaction with non-white characters, and her diversion from traditional Black appearance. The influence of Black Male Marvel characters is discussed in a footnote in the third chapter.

This feminist approach is repeated when Carrington analyses the *Icon* series from DC Comic's affiliate Milestone Media. Augustus Freeman IV, as hero Icon, has a distinctively Black origin story as an alien lifeform raised by an enslaved, Black mother. The comic is told from the perspective of Icon's 15-year-old companion Raquel Ervin (superhero Rocket), whose urban upbringing is contrasted with Icon's experience. Much of the chapter focuses on Rocket's desire to be a writer like Toni Morrison, her teen pregnancy, and her role as a Black, female superhero. Carrington discusses how the depiction of Rocket's Blackness, specifically her appearance and interests, and how crossover elements from other comics helped introduce a White readership to a specifically Black endeavor. Additionally, Rocket's Black female representation is contrasted with Icon who is positioned as her foil in backstory and demeanor. As Carrington adheres to a feminist approach in his analysis of comics, Black femininity is vitally juxtaposed against the prevalence of Black male characters.

The author also discusses Black, male representation in the *Star Trek* episode "Far Beyond the Stars." Here, Black captain Ben Sisko is transported back to the 1950s as a science fiction writer who, though important to his writing firm, is systematically excluded in the firm's representation. Carrington skillfully looks at the teleplay, the television episode, and the novelization of the episode to connect the future culture of the *Deep Space Nine* universe and the 19th Century, revealing the present-day hope that future generations will not be encumbered by racial bigotry. Shifting back to a feminist approach but staying within the *Star Trek* series, Carrington discusses how issues regarding work, presence, and representation begin with Nichelle Nichols' casting as Lieutenant Uhura in the first *Star Trek* television series. Nichols took on a powerful, commanding position in the show, yet was billed as a reoccurring player rather than a permanent character. However, she

still exerted creative control over her Black representation in a White context. As Carrington focuses on how these representations make concrete differences, he notes how Nichols' influence as a Black woman made real life strides through her connection with NASA, reinforcing his point that speculative fiction has greater real world consequences.

Ultimately, Carrington's work is an innovative dialogue regarding a genre that creates worlds speculating on what could be. This project is only the beginning of an endeavor with a vast frontier of possibilities that have been, up to this point, marginally explored. Speculative fiction breaks down preexisting notions of our reality and creates worlds with entirely new expectations and interactions. With the creative liberty of the genre, Carrington casts Black representation as a consumed media but also an imaginative effort. This approach to analyzing racial representation calls for further examinations that can be updated as quickly as fan fiction can be produced.

👤 Bio

Daniella Mascarenhas

Daniella Mascarenhas is an ABD doctoral candidate of political science at the University of Houston. Her dissertation examines the political theory of punishment, specifically looking at how American private prisons are incompatible with the prevailing justifications for punishment in a social contract. She has accrued teaching experience in political theory, federal government, and local government at Lone Star Community College and University of Houston. Other research interests include comparative political parties, political institutions, social contract theory, and American constitutionalism.